

Lourdes

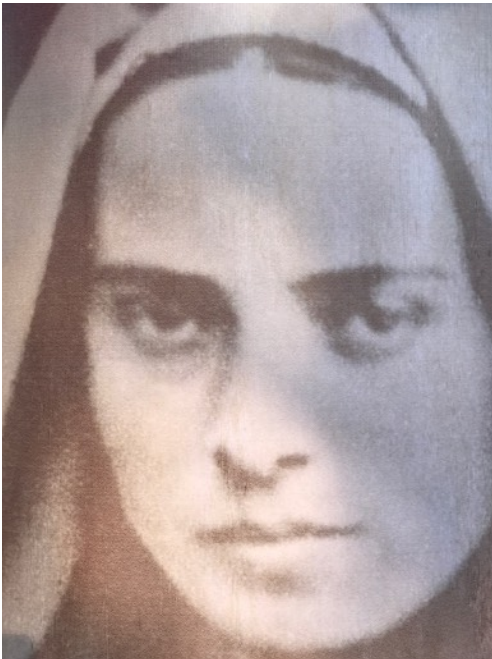
Dear Parishioners,

Earlier this week I spent an afternoon sitting before the Holy Grotto at Lourdes and praying upon your many, many petitions. I was very much moved by your expressions of faith and love for Our Lord and Our Lady. Each of your notes and letters, signs of your interior devotion, was attentively left at the special place designated for such messages within the grotto itself, just a few feet away from where the Virgin stood and St. Bernadette knelt during the apparitions. Lourdes never fails to inspire me. There is such a tremendous outpouring of love and charity here that no one can honestly deny the presence and action of the Holy Spirit.

Last night after the procession I encountered a Chinese couple (Kang and Yan) who were enticed away from the hustle and bustle of Paris to the humility of Lourdes. The husband had been exposed to Catholicism in Hong Kong but was a non-Christian. His wife, Yan, comes from mainland China, just next to the North Korean border. Her parents are Communist Party members and she was raised in an atheistic home. But she was deeply moved as she stood before the Holy Grotto. Kang could not cease commenting about the evident power of Lourdes, and aptly noted that the countless volunteers who care for the sick are in a way proof of the veracity of the apparitions.

I also took a few days to go to Paris, although I was a bit reluctant to leave Mary's peaceful enclave in the mountains. The grand city is looming and is in a sense the heart of the secular engine of 1789. So I was quite surprised when the first thing I heard as I walked out of the Montparnasse train station were the words, "*Bonjour, mon Père.*" I turned to see a young Frenchman looking at me and hoping for a few coins, but he was not bedraggled (at least not outwardly). We talked a bit, and again, life had

spun out of control and he was caught in the web of disorder. Hunger made its imperious demands and he was in the humiliating state of holding out his hand for help. I asked if he would like a blessing, and he responded, "*No, I am an atheist. I have seen too much suffering to believe in God.*" I repeated my offer; this time looking more intently at him. He paused, and then said, "*Oui, mon Père...*" And so my trip began by blessing an atheist in the streets of Paris.

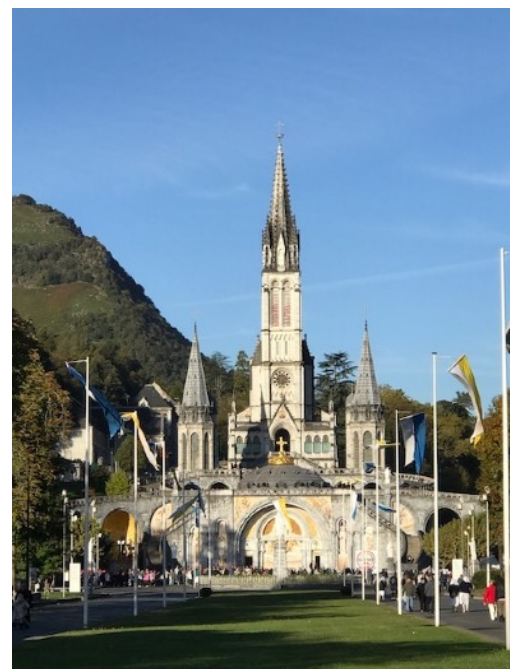


The Visionary, Bernadette Soubirous

But yesterday as I was standing alone in a little park before a statue of St. Bernadette, outside of the "pilgrimage zone" of the village, I was suddenly approached by different sort of Frenchman. He must have seen his opportunity since I was isolated for the moment from the protective crowds. At first I could not catch his words but it was evident that he was berating our Holy Religion. I wanted to be sure I understood him before I responded so I explained that I was not French and could he speak more clearly. He said, "*What are you then, Italian?*" Taking that as the one compliment I'd get from this unpleasant encounter, I nevertheless answered, "*Je suis américain.*" At this he shouted, "*C'est pire!!*" (*That makes it even worse!*). And then a new torrent of abusive language poured forth. [Now here I must interject that being Catholic *and* American is something I thank God for every day. And I also thought to myself, "*We saved you twice, mon ami!*"].



The peasant's veil and shoes St Bernadette wore during the apparitions of 1858.



Lourdes

Now when this began all I was doing was standing there praying before a little statue of a little Saintess minding my own business. But I said to him in response to his anti-Catholic and anti-American slurs, "*C'est pas vrai...*" ("*What you say is not true...*"). His rage began to boil over and he began shouting louder. He was losing it. I began to walk away and he *followed* me. I was wondering where this was going to end up because he was menacing me physically at this point. And to be honest, I was asking myself how my old *Tae Kwan Do* moves would work in a cassock, but decided this would produce quite an awful headline. So I said to him, "*God bless you,*" and I made my escape. He roared at me as I turned the corner and out of sight.

This particular member of *homo sapiens sapiens* had really disturbed me, and I stopped momentarily on the sidewalk to consider what had just occurred. And I almost turned back. Suddenly before me I saw two kindly, smiling Sicilian faces – an elderly husband and wife on pilgrimage. They greeted me warmly and immediately we were immersed in a lovely conversation about the Faith and Our Lady and all things beautiful and good. God sent them just in time, literally within minutes of my near disaster in the park.

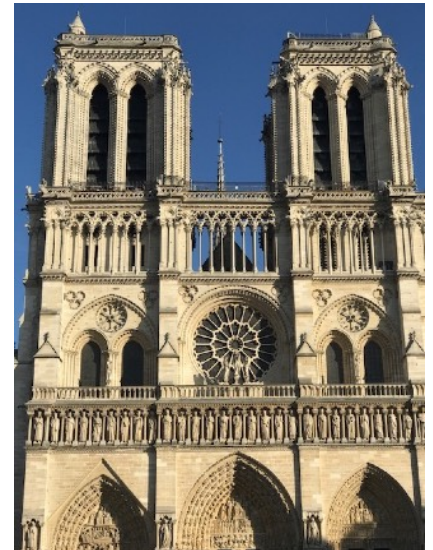
I continued down the sidewalk back to the safety of the Grotto (I needed to talk about this with Our Lady), when I came across an old man begging, yet another gypsy. His name was unusual, something like *Geor*. He was clearly not faring well and needed someone to care that he existed, at least for a moment. We exchanged a few words and I gave him something to help him. Then I blessed him. He took my hand and kissed it and tears welled up in his eyes. This all happened within a space of 30 minutes during my morning walk.

France, the Eldest Daughter of the Church, is occupied territory. The evil spirit of 1789 has to have had something to do with the poison coursing through the veins of the man in the park. The very Church of God, which made France great for over a millennium, has been undermined and attacked in this country for far too long. The secular ruling elite have banished the Faith from public life and horribly twist the people's perception of what is in fact the best thing that has ever happened to them, viz., their conversion to the Church.



The Seine River, Paris

They are so fanatical about this suppression of Catholicism that they cannot see that only the Faith will be able to save them from what historians have called the "Scourge of God," or ascendant Islam. I have written about Muslims in this column previously, and in a hopeful way. Each one of them is a human being that has a destiny in Christ Jesus. This is the only real hope for Europe : the conversion of the Muslims to Catholicism. And I hold that it can happen.



Notre Dame de Paris

But all should know that there is great worry even here in Lourdes that there will be an attack. Huge concrete barriers have been erected to prevent car bombs or trucks from ravaging the shrine which fills up with myriads of pilgrims. And the workers here have repeatedly told me they have occasionally noticed strange men in long beards and long tunics, as if they are doing reconnaissance. I myself noticed this the other night. So the man in the park (who is emblematic of the pathetically irrational secular Left) really is missing the mark and just needs to *snap out of it!* Europe is in an existential crisis so it's time to put away Voltaire and pick up Aquinas again.

There is so much suffering in the world! It either crushes us or redeems us. At Lourdes however, there is redemption. The scenes of so many sick people endlessly streaming to the Holy Grotto; processing in their wheelchairs with candles in hand; attending Mass after Mass; standing in endless lines for confession; all these actions are signs that suffering can wound but need not destroy us. There is always hope beyond the suffering, and we can look toward the example of our Divine Lord and His Suffering Mother. Heaven is in solidarity with us in our suffering.

Dear parishioners, I hope and pray that each of you realize the tremendous blessing that is ours. We profess the True Faith, we join together in common prayer before the Altar of God each day, we are enriched by the grace of the Sacraments, we know and love Our Lady! We even know that we are so very imperfect, yet have the faith to be able to see how God's loving Hand still guides us. There is so much good in our parish life. And there is so much bewilderment and chaos in the world swirling about. Bless the Lord everyday for what we have been given and let us never forget how good indeed God is...

--Father de Rosa